

## The Ads Must Go On: A Thematic Analysis of COVID-19 in Global Ads

Mary E. Brooks  
Shannon Bichard  
Clay Craig  
Andrea Bergstrom

*COVID-19 not only affected the health and caused the deaths of millions of people around the globe, but it was also a contributing factor to the ways businesses, organizations and entire industries operate. One such change was showcased in many brand's advertisements from the onset of the pandemic in most countries in early 2020. This study analyzed a collection of ads from March 2020 and August 2020 that were centered on various components related to the coronavirus pandemic. Ads originated from a variety of brands and from more than a dozen countries. Results from this qualitative thematic analysis revealed three main themes of edutainment, pragmatic consistency, and creative optimism. Additionally, advertising films were framed using metaphors, symbolism, and visual imagery. Results also revealed differences in message framing based on country of origin, brand, and timeframe.*

**Keywords:** Thematic analysis, COVID-19, ads of the world, framing theory

### Introduction

The 2019 novel coronavirus disease, commonly referred to as COVID-19, unequivocally disrupted and upended society on a global scale in unpredictable ways. The crisis not only negatively affected the health of citizens in mind, body, and spirit, but it also encumbered a tremendous negative economic impact and severely altered business practices. Current research has examined the media's coverage of COVID-19 revealing the prominent use of language accentuating human interest and fear (Ogbodo et al., 2020).

A common method in which brands promote their messages is through advertising. Brands and organizations most commonly use advertising for informational, entertainment, and persuasion purposes. During the COVID-19 crises, brands still utilized these purposes, but in a new wave of "pandemic advertising" (Beer, 2020, para. 6). Rittenhouse (2020) reports on a survey conducted by the media consulting company, Kantar, where they asked consumers questions about their expectations of brands advertising efforts during the coronavirus pandemic. Results of the survey revealed most survey respondents wanted brands to maintain a sense of normalcy by continuing with advertising, but with messages of help and not of brand promotion.

The study of advertising during a pandemic is not new. Many scholars have explored advertising messages, public service announcements and social marketing campaigns related to the AIDS pandemic (Bush & Boller, 1991; Hofmann, 2009; Terblanche-Smit & Terblanche, 2010a; Terblanche-Smit & Terblanche, 2010b; Terblanche-Smit & Terblanche, 2013); to the bird flu pandemic (Jones et al., 2010); and to influenza (Siu, 2010). Results indicate that how a message is offered to consumers can impact subsequent opinions and behavior.

This study aims to add to the robust history of research by divulging how global brands framed their messages about COVID-19 at two different points in time in 2020. Framing theory posits that

---

**Mary E. Brooks** (PhD, Texas Tech University, 2015) is an Assistant Professor and Jenny Lind Porter Professor of Communication in the Sybil B. Harrington College of Fine Arts and Humanities, Department of Communication at West Texas A&M University. Address correspondence to the first author at [mbrooks@wtamu.edu](mailto:mbrooks@wtamu.edu).

**Shannon Bichard** (Ph.D., University of Florida, 2001) is an Associate Professor and Chairperson of Advertising and Brand Strategy in the College of Media & Communication at Texas Tech University.

**Clay Craig** (Ph.D., Texas Tech University, 2013) is an Associate Professor in the School of Journalism & Mass Communication at Texas State University.

**Andrea Bergstrom** (Ph.D., University of Massachusetts Amherst, 2011) is an Assistant Professor in Communication, Media & Culture at Coastal Carolina University.

message construction can impact how people interpret information (Goffman, 1974). The purpose of this study is to illustrate how global advertising was used to help people understand how to navigate living in a world battling a novel pandemic.

## Literature Review

### Advertising & Crisis

Advertising during a crisis is a common practice and has been analyzed often in past research. Studies have focused on public service advertising promoting influenza vaccinations as well as AIDS and other health crises (Bush & Bowler, 1991; Dahlen & Lange, 2006; Nowak et al., 2015; Lee et al., 2018). Lee et al. (2018) noted the importance of gain versus loss frames as well as the support of visual and textual content when promoting influenza vaccinations. Bush and Bowler (1991) studied CDC sponsored advertising campaigns during 1987-89 focused on the AIDS pandemic. The findings of their rhetorical analysis showed that advertising took a different role each year by emphasizing facts, inducing fear, and finally providing coping strategies aimed at prevention.

Jenyns (2020) discussed advertising during the COVID-19 crisis and emphasized the use of authenticity in brand messaging. Several dimensions of authenticity have been studied by past researchers to identify effective responses (Grayson & Martinec, 2004; Beverland, 2006; Leigh et al., 2006). Some of the most relevant dimensions include featuring credibility, heritage, tradition, and motives not driven by commerciality. Using these themes can demonstrate that a brand is paying attention to current conditions and trying to shift their advertising strategy to speak to the needs of the community.

### Framing

Framing theory originated through the work of Erving Goffman in his 1974 seminal piece explaining frame analysis (Goffman, 1974). Since that work, framing theory has been a mainstay in media studies specific to political communication, advertising, and health communication studies. Framing is concerned with how messages are constructed which then allows the consumers of those messages to make sense of a certain issue. Issue framing can shape individual focus and opinion formation by emphasizing certain elements and downplaying others when presenting information (Druckman, 2001).

Past research on framing has identified several devices used to package information such as metaphors, exemplars, catchphrases, depictions, and visual images (Gamson & Lasch, 1983; Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). Vivid images that are congruent with message content can increase attention and facilitate promotional message processing (McGill & Anand, 1989; Chang & Lee, 2009). In the Chang and Lee study (2009), the authors investigated framing messages that promote charitable donations. The results of their experimental study indicated that vivid imagery magnified the framing effect, especially when presented with negative messages. In a news context, Pan and Kosicki (1993) discussed framing devices as using syntax, script, and themes. Themes go beyond summation to suggest deeper meaning. The use of metaphors and other linguistic devices are a common approach for identifying and interpreting themes in data (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; D'Andrade, 1995; Strauss & Quinn, 1997; Ryan & Bernard, 2003). The use of metaphor and analogy offers the ability to align messages with known exemplars that hold cultural meaning. Multiple visual and verbal tactics can be used to create messages and offer consumers a frame within which to interpret information.

Relevant to this study is one conducted by Brooks et al. (2019) who applied framing theory to ads curated on the Ads of the World website that were focused on the societal issues of gender equality, female empowerment, and climate change. The authors found that most ads analyzed in these collections were centered on climate change and that loss framed messages were most prevalent, regardless of the topic. In addition, rational appeals outweighed emotional appeals, notwithstanding of the social issue under examination.

Concerning the framing of health communication messages, framing was applied to a study by Lee et al. (2018) about how visual and verbal messages were framed concerning flu vaccine messages aimed at young adults. The authors found that images with gain-framed messages and text with loss-framed messages did equally well in terms of a rise in intention, attitude, and confidence level associated with electing to get a flu vaccine.

Past research has also noted that various cultures respond differently to persuasive messages. Highly collective cultures experience more social and familial responsibility and subsequently feel more guilt if they believe they are neglecting these duties (Hofstede, 1980). Congruence of advertising message frames with culture can make content more salient and effective (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993; Yoon & La Ferle, 2018).

The purpose of this study was the examination of global advertising during the COVID-19 pandemic to identify how messages were framed for viewers as they attempted to make sense of the world during a health crisis. The following research questions were developed to investigate the use of framing themes and techniques:

**RQ1:** What themes were present in COVID-19 advertisements?

**RQ2:** How did brands frame their COVID-19 messaging through visuals and verbals?

**RQ3:** How did COVID-19 advertising messages differ in terms of: a) country of origin; b) brand; and c) timeframe?

### Method

A thematic analysis of global COVID-19 ads was conducted to evaluate the research questions. The Ads of the World website is a repository of ads from around the globe. The website is known for its curation of various advertising collections related to numerous topics, events, and social issues, such as COVID-19. More specifically, the authors narrowed down the sample of ads categorized as film as the medium from March 2020 and August 2020. The first timeframe was selected due to the significant impact of the virus infiltrating most countries during March 2020, also known as the first wave of the pandemic. August 2020 was selected as a comparison point in time as various countries had either fully reopened or, at a minimum, lifted some pandemic restrictions. All film ads from March 2020 and August 2020 that were part of the Ads of the World COVID-19 special collections repository were analyzed. The film category was selected to obtain advertisements that included verbal, visual, and auditory framing mechanisms, therefore offering a richer sample for interpretation. The industries represented in these films range from food to pets to hospitality/tourism, among 12 additional industries and 16 countries (See Table 1 & Table 2).

Data collection yielded 48 total video advertisements, with 35 from March 2020 and 13 from August 2020. The 48 ads were selected based on what was available on the Ads of the World website at the time of analysis. The curators of the website determine the ads that viewers have access to, along with country and language of origin of the ads. Two coders viewed the 48 ads and made independent notes. Coders viewed each ad numerous times to fully immerse themselves in the messages and capture details about the content, visuals, and copy used (all written and spoken text was transcribed). For each advertising film the coders independently wrote a detailed description of the overall ad and then broke each ad down even further and described in separate columns every visual and sound that appeared. Following Calasanti's (2007) steps applied to a textual analysis of internet ads, this study implemented a code sheet where recording thick descriptions of each advertising film chosen for the sample occurred by each researcher. Included on the code sheet was an overall description of each advertising film under analysis with separated details including the characters represented and aspects of their ethnicity, gender, and age; the setting of the films; each brand's messaging; the spoken and written words used to develop each ad along with all visuals, verbals, and sounds. Next, the two coders discussed their notes for each advertisement to compare findings. Minor discrepancies were noted and discussed to arrive at a consensus. An example of a minor discrepancy included authors preferences on where a specific

advertising film was categorized within the themes that emerged. Finally, salient themes were developed and refined until both coders agreed that they explained the meaning effectively to answer the research questions.

## Results

The following explanations address each research question posed by offering a description of the salient themes and techniques observed during the inductive analysis of advertising during COVID-19 in March and August of 2020.

### **RQ1: What themes were present in COVID-19 advertisements?**

The first research question investigated the themes presented in global advertising surrounding COVID-19. Three dominant themes emerged from the brands under analysis. Edutainment, pragmatic consistency, and creative optimism appeared frequently as driving motivational themes for the advertising during this time.

#### ***Edutainment***

Brand communication appeared to take efforts to make informative content about COVID-19 as palatable as possible by using entertaining advertising strategies. COVID-19 brought with it new terminology and concepts to initially help ‘flatten the curve’ regarding the daily rise in cases. Novel behavior change concepts including ‘social distancing’ and ‘quarantining’ became common speak. Mask wearing became a hot button accessory so much so that masks often equated to a person’s political leaning, especially in the United States. Even hand washing, although not a new concept, took on more importance than ever.

To help push these urgent healthcare practices, many brands used advertising as a method to educate consumers in an attention getting, relatable and creative manner. For example, humor was a popular tactic. One such U.S. brand that spread the message of mask wearing was Organic Doggie Treats. This advertising film series showcased a regal dog standing on a beach sarcastically contemplating why rules of a dog living in society apply to him, but his owner cannot be bothered with the rule of wearing a mask during a pandemic. Hotels.com continued to use their ongoing, dry humorous spokesperson, Captain Obvious, to spread the simple message that “He’s going to be social distancing for a while. And you should too”. A Croatian beer brand, Karlovacko, utilized an ongoing campaign “Among Your Own” to encourage people to “stay in your crate, among your own”. They cleverly portrayed this message through the classic awkward “meeting the boyfriend” scenario. As the new boyfriend reaches out to shake the hand of his girlfriend’s father, the patriarch rejects the gesture of goodwill. The message of staying with your own is introduced, again reiterating that now is not the time to mingle with others, but instead only stick to those in your immediate family.

Upbeat and youthful music was also used/or even created to make appeals to younger viewers to follow COVID-19 guidelines. An example of this edutainment strategy was offered by the Government of Quebec. They used four well-known rap artists to freely craft the message of how COVID-19 was affecting Canadians and what can be done to help reduce the spread of the virus. Sample lyrics regarding mask wearing include, “Wear it every day. It’s not time to play. Came in like a wave, crashin’ in our face.” Additionally, song lyrics concerning social distancing played out as such, “What if I say keeping our distance doesn’t make us distant? It’s like army - you’re protecting me, protecting yourself. I’m just trying to keep the homies and the family well. We can gather, we can chill. Just no hugs and kisses. Two meters apart, we can still talk and listen.”

Finally, celebrities were also frequently featured in COVID messages to bring a new twist to educating the public about guidelines for protection. Legendary U.S. broadcast network, NBC, adapted their long running “The More You Know” campaign, to reflect five messages about the impact of the virus on specific groups. For example, numerous famous actors who play characters on shows aired on NBC are shown in quick clips talking about different ways to manage depression or loneliness during the

pandemic and while people are quarantining at home. Other clips are similar but give definitions of what it means to be socially distant. The PSAs also describe the more vulnerable populations including older adults. Parental advice is given concerning how to handle being indoors with kids, a not so common practice for working parents. The final message is directly targeted at veterans who have fought for the country. They are encouraged to get tested for the coronavirus if they show any symptoms. Actors speaking these messages are all different ages and range from the Bella twins to Ted Danson to Chrissy Metz.

Perhaps these tactics were used to help ease any defensiveness viewers might exhibit in response to persuasive messaging. However, the importance of the information was not diminished by these efforts.

### ***Pragmatic Consistency***

Several brands during this period chose to focus predominantly on tangible solutions that they provided during the lockdown period. This indicated a sense of normalcy or consistency that brands could offer even during a time of great challenge and uncertainty. These were not novel ideas for these brands, but typical operating procedures. However, considering the coronavirus pandemic, these everyday actions took on a whole new meaning and perhaps provided a sense of relief knowing these brands were not going to change.

For example, McDonald's aired a series of advertising films in the U.S. titled, "We'll Be Here", getting across the message that although things were changing daily and rapidly due to the pandemic, McDonald's will serve as a constant in life just as they have been for 65 years. The messages implied that although one cannot dine-in at a McDonald's does not mean one cannot get the McDonald's experience, just in a new form. This can happen by going through the drive-thru, getting the food delivered or imagining one's own house as a McDonald's. The films are framed to empower customers to still have a good time and to eat McDonald's fare regardless of what type of dwelling one is quarantining in. Advertising copy including, "So that when things keep changing, we can still be here to take your order," speaks to the notion of pragmatic consistency.

Similarly, a Domino's Pizza film titled, "Stay Home. We Deliver", which aired in Saudi Arabia, touted the message that although there is emptiness in the streets and sadness in the world, Domino's will help during this trying time by continuing to deliver food just as they have done for years. Although people's awareness of this feature is high, it takes on a new and more important meaning during the pandemic. Domino's uses a call-to-action specific to the pandemic by encouraging people to stay home and do their part in lowering the virus numbers.

Beyond the food industry, retailers including H&M and technology companies such as Italy's Vodafone and Verizon in the U.S. emphasized their brand values of being ready for anything even when the consumer is not. Verizon's film was framed in a very simple tone with a clear message that Verizon is working hard behind the scenes so that everyone who is dealing with the pandemic will not have to worry about their internet service being disrupted. In a world of uncertainty because of the pandemic, what is certain is Verizon's commitment. Vodafone took a similar approach with their messaging, but with more of an energetic, happy-go-lucky tone. The film shows people adapting to life during the pandemic using Vodafone's technology. It is as if the world keeps turning and nothing is amiss because Vodafone is helping people keep their lives together, whether that be work, school, relationship building or extracurricular related. The messaging is relatable because it shows how everyone is facing and handling the important parts of life throughout this unprecedented time and that people can adapt easily with a consistent technology company.

### ***Creative Optimism***

Many advertisements under analysis simply focused on the positive aspects that are evident during a crisis. They highlighted the ability to focus on family, enjoying time with pets, developing resilience, gratitude for others, or even hope for the future. This 'glass half full' mentality provided a

refreshing brand tone during the pandemic. Brands even used artistic creative elements such as poetry, song lyrics, and interpretive dance to offer their messages of hope and optimism.

An Ikea film, that was aired in Spain, was presented from a home's point of view. The film showcased various shots of people in their homes relaxing, doing work, and spending time together. IKEA wants consumers to remember and enjoy their homes. The tone is sentimental and showcases how the home will always be there for you. The copy on screen reads, "I'm still the place where your children have grown up, where you have celebrated good news and taken refuge from the bad. I'm the place where you can be yourself. Do you remember when we first met? Come on. Feel me. Smell me. Enjoy me. We can turn everything around. Maybe this is the time to rearrange the furniture or get our heads in order. I am your home and I'll be here for you no matter what." IKEA's call-to-action is for people to stay home during this time of the pandemic because much of life's monumental moments happen inside the home, a versatile place that will not abandon you.

Many brands including Jack Daniels and Buffalo Wild Wings in the U.S. used advertising to feature how friends, family and sports enthusiasts are creatively connecting. Examples include shots showing people interacting through social distance activities like video phone calls, playing games with one person inside and the other outside, makeshift games set up inside homes (kitchen table tennis with kitchen pans used as paddles). Finally, shots of people toasting each other through video phone calls and through other social distancing means are shown with what is presumably Jack Daniels whiskey in the glasses. Similarly, the Buffalo Wild Wings film shows short, curated videos of people, mostly kids and younger adults, playing a variety of sports in their homes or other solo locations. Sometimes they implement unique items from around their homes to accomplish these sports tasks including utilizing a treadmill to play hockey, repurposing a toilet paper roll to play soccer, or using a trash can for a basketball hoop. These films give the viewer a sense of how people were passing the time and keeping their spirits lifted, in creative ways, during the initial phase of the pandemic and the need for social distancing. The overarching theme is that although the world has been physically separated from each other, people can still connect and be social through different means and with some innovative, creative thinking.

The U.S. brand Freshpet framed their COVID messaging in a positive way by featuring how happy and satisfied dogs were due to the mandatory stay in place that their owners had to abide by. As the copy states, "Our dogs don't know why we're home more than usual. They're just happy we're around. Take good care of each other." Through this creative optimistic message, via dogs, Freshpet reminds viewers that being at home for unexpected and longer periods of time does wonders for a pet's psyche.

## **RQ2: How did brands frame their COVID-19 messaging through visuals and verbals?**

Visual and verbal strategies during this time of the coronavirus health crisis used a variety of framing mechanisms. Metaphors, symbolism, and visual imagery were popular techniques for brands to use as a convenient method to get across what the world was facing collectively. This aligns with previous research on framing that has identified several devices used to package information such as metaphors, exemplars, catchphrases, depictions, and visual images (Gamson & Lasch, 1983; Gamson & Modigliani, 1989).

### ***Metaphors***

The most common metaphors centered on war or sports. Domino's framed their :45 second film with visuals of a vacant city and its empty roads, businesses, parks and neighborhoods in Saudi Arabia. These visuals were enhanced by a male voiceover reiterating the importance of staying home and reminding viewers how they "carried upon your shoulders the responsibility of protecting your nation like soldiers. You made your country your priority to preserve health and prosperity. We do our part. So, stay home with your loved ones and we will deliver to your doorstep." The visuals then turn to what one could possibly conceive as a lone soldier, a Domino's delivery person, alone on the empty road delivering provisions for the at home soldiers doing their part to help win the battle against COVID-19.

Similarly, Kayzer Ballet, out of Portugal, produced a lengthy film where a ballet dancer tells the story through choreographed dancing of the emotional turmoil many people faced during the onset of the pandemic. Along with the dancing, a male voiceover speaks about the beauty of life before the pandemic and then transitions into how unexpectedly the world turned dark and now, we are at war. The voiceover continues the war metaphor by stating, “The state of emergency was declared. Then a way out, life was shortened. We gathered at home with family. Emotion conquers reason. We are all with the same purpose - to eradicate this monster; to slaughter it; to take away its strength. The same forces it had to take the elderly, the unsuspecting, the fragile. It is the moment of union, of one thought, religion, race, currency, or ideology. It is time to fight this pandemic which came to take away our health. But also damage the economy.” The words used to describe the pandemic with the backdrop of a ballet dancer then transitions into a moment of hopefulness when the voiceover speaks of refuge and the ballet dancer emerges from darkness to light as if society is winning the war over the virus by staying home.

The Thailand Board of Investment film, “Dear Crisis,” uses the sport of boxing as a metaphor for the numerous times that Thailand has been beaten by crises including financial turmoil, tsunamis, and now COVID-19. However, the boxer, in this case the people of Thailand, always fight back. More specifically related to the coronavirus pandemic, the film showcases the evolution of the COVID crisis in terms of high numbers in Thailand all the way to zero cases based on the fight of Thai people.

Budweiser also framed their message using a sports metaphor. The purpose behind their “One Team” film in the U.S. was to put forth the message that everyone is called upon to face this health crisis head on all as one team. Budweiser has long been a sponsor for professional sports teams and now they are putting their sponsorship money behind helping the American Red Cross repurpose baseball stadiums by turning them into blood drive locations. The advertising copy associated with this film also uses professional sports team names as a metaphor to describe front line workers. The male voiceover states, “This Bud’s for the blues, the reds and the warriors. This Bud’s for the magic, the athletics, the giants, and the jazz. This Bud’s for the trailblazers, the braves, the yankees and the angels. This Bud’s for the home team.”

Lastly, several brands in the auto industry used car metaphors to express pausing our motion before we resume activities. For example, Nissan aired an advertising film out of the United Arab Emirates, from the point of view of a Nissan who wrote an “Ode to Empty Roads.” Within the ode, the Nissan car expresses how the road and the Nissan have been together for so long, but now, using a car metaphor, “The great outdoors must now take the backseat as we bide our time indoors.” The ode ends with a hopeful message that one day the road and the Nissan will be together again, in due time.

### ***Symbolism***

Symbols of historical heritage were also evident in the ads likely to maximize on the notion of togetherness. Advertising films from India, Morocco and the United States all featured elements from their countries in relation to the pandemic. Ford framed both versions of their “Built for Right Now, Built to Lend a Hand” ads on Ford’s dedication to America and their historical commitment to those in need. To emphasize this point, along with the aforementioned wartime metaphor, the copy on the screen reads, “Built Ford Proud since 1903. Built through World Wars and natural disasters. Built for those who build this country. Built for those who protect it. Built for workers, parents, sons, daughters, teachers, caregivers, families, people. Built to lend a hand. Built to do that right now.” The film then transitions into information concerning Ford’s financial support initiative. In the same vein, U.S. advertising agency, Doner, speaks about the resolve of Detroit during the pandemic in their “When the Motor Stops” film. Throughout the film, empty scenes of Detroit, Michigan are shown with a heavy emphasis on how Detroit was built upon the shoulders of Ford Motor Company. The irony in the film reflects how Detroit as “motor city” has been forced to stop because of the pandemic. Automotive and wartime metaphors and symbolism related to the heritage of Ford Motor Company and hope for the future are spoken about through a female voiceover stating, “It feels unnatural to not be in motion. For the city built on four wheels to stand still. But these vacant streets, empty stadiums are not signs of our retreat, but of our resolve. This is not us sitting out the fight. This is us winning it. Our fist doesn’t need to move to have

strength. If he were alive today, even Henry himself would have put it in park. So, take this isolation as a sign of our togetherness. As we take care of ourselves and the ones close. Because although it's time for America's motor to stop, we're coming back with all eight cylinders. Because here, we don't stop in the name of fear. Here, we stop in the name of love."

Haircare brand, Parachute Advanced, framed their advertising film around the need of nurses in relation to the annual Southern India celebration and festival, Onam. There is symbolism in the actions of people getting ready for Onam that are like nurses getting ready to nurse COVID patients back to health. Each shot parallels the actions of Indian culture with the actions of medical professionals. For example, when a man is working with pottery alongside his children and shakes his hands of pottery residue, the very next shot is of a nurse shaking his hands after washing them. The message is that the nurses are sacrificing their lives to get you back to yours. The film then shows shots of several people celebrating Onam with their names and a title that they are COVID-19 survivors.

Moroccan creative agency, Hardlight, produced a film that is formatted as if it is an actual movie of Morocco. The various scenes show clips of how Morocco has overcome challenging times in the past from the Battle of Three Kings in 1578, Independence in 1956, Agadir Earthquake in 1960, The Green March in 1975, among other clips of triumphs and setbacks that Moroccans have faced together. It then transitions into showing clips of people being treated in a hospital due to COVID. There are medical professionals showing symbols of determination to beat the coronavirus by tearing up the phrase COVID-19, through wearing masks and shields, and by smiling confidently. The scenes then transition to lone people of all ages smiling and one person on a mountain top with arms spread. The film is framed with a message of empowerment, hope for the future, and pride for the country. Moroccans grow closer as a country during challenging times. There is also a wartime/battle tone to this film through the visuals and verbals utilized. Various sacrificial elements to the film include when the voiceover states in Arabic that "our country needs us", with the ultimate sacrifice being Moroccans staying at home and relinquishing some of their independence.

### ***Visual Imagery***

Visual imagery helped to convey scenes and offer emotional symbolism. Dim lighting was often used to show somber and empty scenes and then changed to colorful bathed in light to show hope for tomorrow. For example, the United Nations film out of China opens with an image of the city at night. White text appears on the screen that says, "When the city is on pause". Scenes then depict empty seats, a playground, church, classrooms, streets, and people at home. The words on the screen encourage taking time to look back, think alone, work with your soul. The film transitions into scenes that take on a more positive spin including a green backyard, people working out, happy couples at home alongside advertising copy that encourages these actions. The final scene is city buildings with the text, "It's time to stay home for him/them/us" and fades to a black screen.

A Motionpoems ad in the U.S. opens with a frame of colorful graphic images of a dripping faucet and then an empty room and streets. The tone gathered from the colors and motion graphics used is very angular and artistic. A man's silhouette is then shown on a balcony. Birds swoop in, the landscape grows darker, and several images of people are featured alone and apart in and around their homes. The scene then pans up into the sky and focuses on stars in the night. The original poem is recited by perhaps the author of the poem, Todd Boss. The poem and the ad's focus is more so on racial injustice rather than the pandemic. The poem seemingly compares the pandemic and racial issues. Stanzas include "But, George Floyd's 8:46 stoked something older on an order more systemic that broke the fever of the pandemic and brought to light a darker and lonelier disease." The author implies through the poem that racial injustice is more of a disease than the pandemic. The film aims to bring light to two major issues from 2020: racial injustice and the pandemic.

Brands including Doner out of the United States and Andra Tutto Bene from Portugal utilized black and white film often to depict heritage. Some ads, including from Renault, Visit Portugal, and the Kayzer Ballet depicted scenes in reverse as if instructing the viewer to stop and think about their actions before they go out in public during a pandemic. Personification was also a common tactic shown in both



the “Dear Crisis” and “Stay Home” films from the Thailand Board of Investment and IKEA, respectively. The choice of scene location also offered visual cues to viewers including at home celebrities for NBC ads and the outdoors like the farm setting for the Croatia Karlovacko film.

**RQ3: How did COVID-19 advertising messages differ in terms of: a) country of origin; b) brand; and c) timeframe?**

Finally, the global advertisements were scrutinized to look for patterns based on country, brand, and time of airing. Differences were assessed as mechanisms for framing message content.

***Country of Origin***

Overall, the U.S. had the most ads represented in this sample (23) with Portugal next with five ads. The remaining ads came from a variety of other countries worldwide including from the United Arab Emirates, Canada, Paraguay, Morocco, Croatia, Chile, Saudi Arabia, Italy, Poland, Spain, India, Germany, Thailand, and China (See Table 1).

Although not an equal comparison, due to the unbalanced number of ads analyzed per country, the difference in messaging related to country of origin showed that the films that appeared outside of the U.S. were framed in a collective societal benefit manner meaning that it was for the betterment of the entire country when multiple people worked together to stop the spread of the virus. This aligns with Hofstede’s (1980) assessment that highly collective cultures experience more social and familial responsibility and subsequently feel more guilt if they believe they are neglecting these duties.

Examples of this approach were evident in the films that were framed with visuals and copy related to the message of living through the pandemic together as a country and sometimes because of a country’s historical heritage which has strengthened its citizens to power through this unprecedented time together. Some countries that presented their ads from this viewpoint originated from Thailand, Chile, Morocco, and Portugal. Conversely, the U.S. typically took a more brand centric and practical solution approach. For example, McDonald’s reminded consumers of the practicality of their drive-thru which has been a part of their brand business model for decades. However, the simple and sensible messaging took on an entirely different meaning when viewing it through the lens of battling a pandemic. As a result of the onset of the virus, most Americans were relegated to an extended stay in place in their homes which brought along its own set of challenges. McDonald’s hoped to alleviate some of these challenges through their practical drive-thru and delivery options. Humor was also a more popular tone used in the U.S. films.

***Brand Category***

When reviewing the brand categories, it appears that food was the most popular category (See Table 2). Public interest and agency self-promotion were also frequent categories. The public interest category did align most frequently with the educational or optimism frames and they appeared to focus primarily on the public and the crisis. An example of agency self-promotion comes from Lobby Films and Advertising out of Portugal. The ad is framed in a rainforest type setting with two bats hanging upside down and speaking with each other about the pandemic being their fault. It is a humorous ad by using bats as the butt of the joke because bats were said to be the carrier of the virus. There is also a sense that the bats are in this predicament with humans because they mention their requirement to stay inside their caves. The agency is attempting to capitalize on this time during the pandemic by promoting their services and how filming can still go on with their repository of stock footage. The message implies that some normalcy with life can still happen with the help of this agency.

***Timeframe***

Of the 48 ads analyzed, 35 were aired in March 2020 at the height of the pandemic for most countries, while 13 of the ads aired in August 2020 when some countries began to reopen. One difference

amongst the films, in terms of timeline, was the number of films produced at the onset of the pandemic as compared to five months later. However, this could be due to the limitations associated with the Ads of the World website regarding the number of ads curated. An additional difference is the ads from August were more focused on COVID-19 guidelines whereas the films from March were more focused on community and cultural efforts related to navigating the pandemic as one. Additionally, the ads from August were more gratitude focused as was showcased in the Parachute Advanced Gold beauty ad from India titled #thankyournurses.

### Discussion

The current study looked at global advertising during the COVID-19 pandemic to identify themes and techniques used in framing advertising messages for the public. The purpose of the inquiry was to observe how advertisers attempted to help the public understand and navigate a health crisis. Thematic analysis was used as a process for inductive analysis of the video advertising in the sample. A total of 48 ads from March and August of 2020 were selected from the COVID-19 collection on the Ads of the World website to conduct the research. A variety of themes emerged as well as visual/verbal techniques and differences based on country, brand category, and timeframe.

One dominant theme in the film advertisements during COVID-19 was *edutainment*. Brands recognized the need for public education during a time of great uncertainty. Many of the ads featured specific information about how to navigate the crisis by proper distancing, PPE, and staying home. Offering the public pertinent information during a crisis is common and past research has noted this technique (Bush & Bowler, 1991; Dahlen & Lange, 2006; Nowak et al., 2015; Lee et al., 2018). The advertising during COVID-19 had some similarities to themes noted by Bush and Bowler (1991) who observed advertising emphasizing facts and coping strategies during the AIDS pandemic. Interestingly, the ads also used a variety of tactics that may have served to soften the defenses of those not wishing to abide by the proposed guidelines. Humor, celebrities, and music appeared often in combination with important warnings and recommendations. Perhaps this was aimed at encouraging safe behavior even among those that found the guidelines were infringing on their personal freedom. Future research is needed that explores this type of message framing to determine if it indeed minimizes defensiveness among viewers.

Another dominant theme that appeared was the notion of *pragmatic consistency*. Several brands chose to focus advertising efforts on the tangible solutions that their product or service provided. Food delivery, take-out options, as well as mobile phone technology for connection were popular topics for these brands. This somewhat contradicts past research that suggests that commercially driven motivations are not as well received as they indicate a lack of brand authenticity during crisis (Grayson & Martinec, 2004; Beverland, 2006; Leigh et al., 2006). Brands that chose to frame messages with pragmatic solutions may have appeared by some as trying to capitalize on commercial gain during a time of fear and uncertainty. Other viewers may have appreciated the rational approach to provide consistency during uncertain times. Future study should address this contradiction and the effects on perceptions of brand authenticity.

The third theme noted in the current sample of video ads was that of *creative optimism*. Many of the brands during this time chose to highlight the positive aspects and perspective gained during the COVID-19 pandemic. Being home allowed for increased connection with family, quality time with pets, as well as opportunities to notice the emergence of healthcare heroes. Messages with this theme were unique in that they offered a fresh perspective and emphasized hope for the future. Although these ads were refreshing and uplifting, past research notes that framing using a loss appeal (rather than gain appeals) are more prevalent for social issues (Brooks et al., 2019).

The use of visual and verbal techniques was another central focus for the current research. A variety of framing mechanisms were observed in the sample including the use of metaphors, symbolism, and visual imagery. Metaphors of war and athletic prowess allowed viewers to equate the plight of COVID-19 with common cultural exemplars of a battlefield or sports arena in which we fight a common

enemy. This is a common approach in past research (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; D'Andrade, 1995; Strauss & Quinn, 1997; Ryan & Bernard, 2003).

Symbolism was apparent in the advertising analyzed and most often emerged with a focus on heritage, tradition, and cultural determination. Many of the brands advertising during the pandemic provided historical context as a way of showcasing their strong heritage and perseverance during struggles. The chronological images of overcoming obstacles and relying on community provided an empowering frame of message likely aimed at instilling confidence in the face of crisis. Past research indicates that heritage and tradition are themes that align with dimensions of brand authenticity (Grayson & Martinec, 2004; Beverland, 2006; Leigh et al., 2006; Jenyns, 2020). Authenticity is an important dimension of trust and is vital for brand success.

Visual imagery was a frequent tactic used in the COVID-19 ads to creatively convey emotion. Light and dark as well as shadows signified feelings of struggle, hope, and somber solitude. A few brands even chose to film completely in black and white which played into symbols of heritage as well as feelings of despair and intensity. Modern graphics were even used with angular images depicting characters struggling with the pandemic and racial injustice. The use of vivid imagery has been studied in the past revealing that message content combined with congruent vivid images enhances message processing (McGill & Anand, 1989; Chang & Lee, 2009). This congruency needs further study for possible application to advertising during times of crisis. Interestingly, a few of the videos were shot partially in reverse with scenes that seemed to visually instruct viewers to stop, backtrack, and reconsider their actions and instead opt to stay home.

Differences in advertising themes and techniques were studied with respect to country of origin, brand category, and timeframe. The results indicate a few relevant trends. The most notable finding in this regard was apparent when comparing U.S. advertising with all other countries. The U.S. was more likely to feature brand-centric content maximizing pragmatic consistency and individualism. Ads in collectivist cultures were more likely to feature symbols of heritage, tradition, and community responsibility. These frames show an attempt to match cultural values with advertising content. This is important considering that past research indicates this type of congruent messaging can magnify effectiveness (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993; Yoon & La Ferle, 2018).

Not surprisingly, the brand category of public interest and agency self-promotion most often aligned with messages that were more informational in nature. These ads were used to promote safety guidelines and a general spirit of compliance. Food brands most often featured the pragmatic consistency theme due to the need for awareness regarding new delivery, curbside, and drive thru options. Pets and alcoholic beverage brand categories were more likely to utilize messages highlighting creative optimism (with a side of humor). All of these seem consistent with traditional advertising strategy.

The final difference studied for the current sample addressed any changes in advertising frames apparent for August compared to March of 2020. The most obvious difference was the sheer amount of advertising featured in the COVID-19 collection on the Ads of the World repository during the two points in time. March had considerably more examples of COVID-19 ads when compared to August. This may be due to website limitations but is more likely attributed to the dramatic surge of attention to the pandemic in March of 2020. This is considered by most to be the first wave of the pandemic and it was during this time that many countries were experiencing lockdown measures and restrictions. Advertisers responded to these initial feelings of panic and uncertainty by speaking directly to consumers with a variety of messages aimed at providing information, hope, and consistency.

## **Limitations**

As with any study, the current research has limitations. The Ads of the World website collections do not contain an exhaustive sample of all advertising during COVID-19. It is a repository of selected advertising featuring examples from global brands. While this is useful in providing a thematic analysis for a wide variety of brands, it does not address all advertising from all countries affected by the pandemic. Future study may wish to dig deeper into the ad strategies of specific countries to offer a more

in-depth analysis. The timeframe could also be extended to better capture the ebb and flow of different framing themes and techniques. The current study provides an illuminating assessment of how advertisers chose to frame messages during a time of crisis and uncertainty. Different approaches likely prompted different responses among viewers. Future study should continue to parse out the frames used as well as subsequent consumer sentiment. Understanding how to effectively speak with consumers in challenging times is essential for maintaining brand relevance and authenticity.

### **Conclusion**

The implications for this research are many. First, this study adds to existing scholarship regarding how advertising is used during crises. Society is educated about issues through a variety of means and advertising is often used as an educational tool to teach consumers, often in a relatable way, about societal challenges. The advertising messages about COVID-19 from well-known brands is one method for which consumers were educated about the nuances related to this novel pandemic. Second, this current study builds upon framing theory especially within the context of health communication. Finally, it is likely that the world will endure pandemics in the future. Thus, the results of this research study contributes to the advertising industry in that practitioners can learn advertising techniques from these global ads and to apply those techniques to brand messages that encourage solidarity and hope during a time of universal crisis.

## References

- Beer, J. (2020, March 30). 'We're all in this together'? Why brands have so little to say in the pandemic. *Marketers care. Not just about the crisis, but about you, too. Really. How the pandemic has hamstringing advertising into vague platitudes and self-serving gestures.* Fast Company. <https://www.fastcompany.com/90483063/were-all-in-this-together-why-brands-have-so-little-to-say-in-the-pandemic>
- Beverland, M. (2006). The 'real thing': Branding authenticity in the luxury wine trade. *Journal of Business*, 59, 251–258. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2005.04.007>
- Brooks, M. E., Craig, C. M., & Bichard, S. (2019). Exploring Ads of the World: How social issues are framed in global advertisements. *Howard Journal of Communications*, 31(2), 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10646175.2019.1666068>
- Bush, A., & Boller, G. (1991). Rethinking the role of television advertising during health crises: A rhetorical analysis of the federal AIDS campaigns. *Journal of Advertising*, 20(1), 28–37. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00913367.1991.10673204>
- Calasanti, T. (2007). Bodacious berry, potency wood and the aging monster: Gender and age relations in anti-aging ads. *Social Forces*, 86(1), 335–355. <https://doi.org/10.1353/sof.2007.0091>
- Chang, C. & Lee, Y. (2009). Framing charity advertising: Influences of message framing, image valence, and temporal framing on a charitable appeal. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 39(12), 2910–2935. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1559-1816.2009.00555.x>
- Dahlen, M., & Lange, F. (2006). A disaster is contagious: How a brand in crisis affects other brands. *Journal of Advertising Research*, 46(4), 388–397. <https://doi.org/10.2501/S0021849906060417>
- D'Andrade, R. (1995). *The development of cognitive anthropology*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Druckman, J.N. (2001). On the limits of framing effects: Who can frame? *Journal of Politics*, 63, 1041–1066. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2691806>
- Eagly, A.H. & Chaiken, S. (1993). *The Psychology of Attitudes*, Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Gamson, W.A. & Lasch, K.E. (1983). The political culture of social welfare policy. In S.E. Spiro & E. Yuchtman-Yarr (Eds.), *Evaluating the welfare state: Social and political perspectives* (pp. 397–415). San Diego, CA: Academic Press.
- Gamson, W.A. & Modigliani, A. (1989). Media discourse and public opinion: A constructionist approach. *American Journal of Sociology*, 95, 1–37. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2780405>
- Goffman, E. (1974). *Frame analysis: An essay on the organization of experience*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Grayson, K. & Martinec, R. (2004). Consumer perceptions of iconicity and indexicality and their influence on assessments of authentic market offerings. *Journal of Consumer Research* 31(2), 296–312. <https://doi.org/10.1086/422109>
- Hofmann, R. (2009). The king of AIDS awareness. *POZ*, (155), 44.
- Hofstede, G. (1980). *Culture's Consequences*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Jenyns, C. (2020). Changing tides: The impact of crisis on advertising. Special Issue: Coronavirus, Crisis and Communication. *Media International Australia*, 178(1), 36–41. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X20951996>
- Jones, S., Waters, L., Holland, O., Bevins, J., & Iverson, D. (2010). Developing pandemic communication strategies: Preparation without panic. *Journal of Business Research*, 63(2), 126–132. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2009.02.009>
- Lakoff, G & Johnson, M. (1980). *Metaphors we live by*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Lee, Y. I., Jin, Y., & Nowak, G. (2018). Motivating influenza vaccination among young adults: The effects of public service advertising message framing and text versus image support. *Social Marketing Quarterly*, 24(2), 89–103. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1524500418771283>

- Leigh, T.W., Peters, C., & Shelton, J. (2006). The consumer quest for authenticity: The multiplicity of meanings within the MG subculture of consumption. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 34(4), 481–493. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0092070306288403>
- McGill, A.L. & Anand, P. (1989). The effects of vividness attributes on the evaluation of alternatives: The role of differential attention and cognitive elaboration. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 16, 188–196. <https://doi.org/10.1086/209207>
- Nowak, G.J., Gellin, B.G., MacDonald, M.E., & Butler, R. (2015). Addressing vaccine hesitancy: The potential value of commercial and social marketing principles and practices. *Vaccine*, 33, 4201–4211. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.vaccine.2015.04.039>
- Ogbodo, J.N., Onwi, E.C., Chukwu, J., Nwasum, C.J., Nwakpu, E.S., Nwankwo, S.U., Nwamini, S., Elem, S. & Ogbeaja, N.I. (2020). Communicating health crisis: A content analysis of global media framing of COVID-19. *Health Promotion Perspectives*, 10(3), 257–269. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7420175/#:~:text=https%3A//doi.org/10.34172/hpp.2020.40>
- Pan, Z. & Kosicki, G.M. (1993). Framing analysis: An approach to news discourse. *Political Communication*, 10(1), 55–75. <https://doi:10.1080/10584609.1993.9962963>
- Rittenhouse, L. (2020, March 25). *Kantar study shows consumers expect brands to be helpful during coronavirus pandemic. 75 percent of respondents say companies should not exploit the health crises to promote themselves, but only 8 percent feel they should stop advertising.* Ad Age. <https://adage.com/article/agency-news/kantar-study-shows-consumers-expect-brands-be-helpful-during-coronavirus-pandemic/2246361>
- Ryan, G.W. & Bernard, H.R. (2003). Techniques to identify themes. *Field Methods*, 15(1), 85–109.
- Siu, W. (2010). Fear appeals and public service advertising: Applications to influenza in Hong Kong. *Health Communication*, 25(6-7), 580. <https://doi:10.1080/10410236.2010.496829>
- Strauss & Quinn, (1997). *A cognitive theory of cultural meaning*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Terblanche-Smit, M. & Terblanche, N. S. (2013). HIV/Aids fear appeal advertisements directed at different market segments: Some considerations for corporate sponsors and NPO's. *South African Journal of Business Management*, 44(4), 65–76. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/sajbm.v44i4.169>
- Terblanche-Smit, M. & Terblanche, N. (2010a). The effect of fear appeal HIV-AIDS social marketing on behaviour: Evaluating the importance of market segmentation. *Theoretical and Applied Economics*, 11(552), 79-90.
- Terblanche-Smit, M., & Terblanche, N. (2010b). Race and attitude formation in HIV/Aids fear advertising. *Journal of Business Research*, 63(2), 121–125. <https://doi:10.1016/j.jbusres.2009.02.008>
- Yoon, H.J. & La Ferle, C. (2018). Saving behavior messaging: Gain/loss framing, self/family orientations, and individual differences in collectivism. *Journal of Advertising*, 47(2), 146-160. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00913367.2017.1408507>

**Table 1***COVID-19 Global Advertisements by Country of Origin & Timing*

Country	March	August	Totals
United States	20	3	23
Portugal	5	0	5
Canada	0	4	4
Chile	1	2	3
UAE	2	0	2
Paraguay	1	0	1
Morocco	1	0	1
Croatia	1	0	1
Saudi Arabia	1	0	1
Italy	1	0	1
Poland	1	0	1
Spain	1	0	1
India	0	1	1
Germany	0	1	1
Thailand	0	1	1
China	0	1	1
Total Ads	13	35	48

**Table 2***COVID-19 Global Advertisements by Brand Category & Timing*

<i>Category</i>	<i>March</i>	<i>August</i>	<i>Totals</i>
Food	7	2	9
Public Interest, NGO	0	7	7
Agency Self Promotion	6	0	6
Media	5	0	5
Automotive	4	0	4
Pets	1	2	3
Alcoholic Drinks	3	0	3
Hospitality/Tourism	2	0	2
Recreation/Leisure	2	0	2
Electronics/Technology	2	0	2
Retail Services	1	0	1
Finance	1	0	1
House/Garden	1	0	1
Beauty	0	1	1
Fashion	0	1	1
<b>Total Ads</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>48</b>